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TAGS: PREL LY BG FR

SUBJECT: FM DOUSTE-BLAZY VISIT TO LIBYA FOCUSES ON PLIGHT OF IMPRISONED MEDICS, ASSISTANCE TO HIV-INFECTED CHILDREN

REF: 05 TRIPOLI 337 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This message contains an action request for Washington in para 10.

¶2. (C) Summary: FM Douste-Blazy's January 5 visit to Libya focused on French assistance offers to HIV-infected children in Benghazi, in an effort to help facilitate the release of Bulgarian/Palestinian medics wrongly convicted of infecting the children. MFA contacts stressed that the FM's interest in the imprisoned medics issue was spurred by his medical background and a conversation he had with FM Shalgam on the margins of the Barcelona summit. Douste-Blazy was the first foreign minister to meet with the imprisoned medics, and also with the families of the infected children, whom MFA contacts described as hard-line and convinced that a foreign conspiracy was behind the tragedy. Douste-Blazy offered the GOL to treat some 25-35 of the HIV-infected children in France, and confirmed GoF willingness to help build the capacity of the Benghazi hospital. MFA contacts were hopeful that the GOL would eventually move towards releasing the medics later this year, though they expressed concern that the GOL did not appear to be preparing the population for such an eventuality. Other topics raised during Douste-Blazy's meetings with FM Shalgam and Qadhafi included Syria/Lebanon, Africa, and recent unrest in French suburbs. MFA contacts also commented on the haphazard nature of the schedule, with the FM being an unexpected guest at a Qadhafi rap session with the public. End summary.

FOCUS ON BENGHAZI HIV-INFECTED CHILDREN, FOREIGN MEDICS CASE

¶3. (C) French FM Philippe Douste-Blazy visited Libya January 5 and met with FM Shalgam, PM Ghanem and Libyan "Supreme Guide" Muammar Qadhafi. We received separate readouts on the visit from MFA DAS-equivalent for the Maghreb Christian Testot and MFA Cabinet Advisor for North Africa Francois Thoizy. Testot stressed that Douste-Blazy's overriding objective was to present a French assistance offer for HIV-infected children in Benghazi, in an effort to help facilitate the release of Bulgarian/Palestinian medics long imprisoned by the GOL. Testot explained that Douste-Blazy had taken a special interest in the issue due to his medical background and long-standing concern on HIV/AIDS issues. The visit was spurred by a conversation which Douste-Blazy had with Libyan FM Shalgam on the margins of the Barcelona Summit last November, during which Shalgam invited the French FM to meet the families of the HIV-infected children and explore possible French assistance, a request to which Douste-Blazy wanted to respond quickly,

¶4. (C) Testot described the Benghazi families as hard-line and resolute in the belief that a foreign conspiracy was behind their children's afflictions and that the foreign medics should be executed. In Testot's view, the Benghazi families did not appear to be manipulated by the GOL; on the contrary, they appeared independent from and in confrontation with the regime, as Benghazi had long been a rival and "problem child" for Tripoli. Testot added that the Benghazi families seemed disinterested in potential French assistance to the local hospital and instead were focused entirely on having their children treated in France -- a potential problem, since the GoF was seeking to treat only a small number of the children in France. The GoF envisioned welcoming 25-30 Benghazi children in France for medical treatment in coming months; the remainder of French assistance would be focused on training doctors, nurses, and lab technicians at Benghazi hospital, in an effort to improve treatment for the children in Libya. A MFA/medical team would visit Benghazi by late January to assess cases and determine which children were most in need of treatment in France; Testot commented that of the approximately 450 infected children, 50 had died, some were healthy, and 250 were undergoing treatment, in many cases for illnesses unrelated to HIV/AIDS. Cabinet Middle East advisor Francois Thoizy, who traveled to Libya in late December to meet the families in advance, described the Benghazi families as overjoyed to meet with a visiting foreign minister for the first time, and somewhat bitter that international attention had focused on the medics only. Thoizy added that, rather than ask the families outright to support clemency for the medics, the FM took a more indirect approach and appealed to the families that it was time to "end everyone's suffering" in this tragedy.

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¶5. (C) Testot described Douste-Blazy's meeting with four imprisoned Bulgarian nurses (one was too sick to attend) and one Palestinian doctor as emotional, and boosting the prisoners' morale. Douste-Blazy delivered the nurses a message of solidarity from Bulgarian FM Passy, with whom he had consulted before the visit. The meeting took place in the office of the prison warden and included foreign media coverage; Testot expressed disappointment that the GOL did not allow local press to cover the meeting, which went unmentioned in the Libyan media. Testot expressed cautious hope that the medics could be released later this year, after their expected retrial. He concluded that the GOL appeared to be looking for an exit on the issue, but needed to do more to sensitize the public to the prospect of the medics' release.

OTHER TOPICS: AFRICA, SYRIA/LEBANON, FRENCH SUBURBAN UNREST

¶6. (C) Testot described discussions of regional topics during the Shalgam and Qadhafi meetings as largely superficial and offering no surprises. Testot observed that Shalgam and Douste-Blazy had a constructive exchange on Africa, and commented that Libya no longer played the destabilizing role on the continent that it had in the past. Testot described French and Libyan views on Africa as now more convergent, noting positively that Libya had not made life difficult for Chad President Deby, whom the GoF was seeking to support. (Comment: We heard a divergent view on Libyan support for Chadian rebels from the MFA Africa A/S-equivalent January 13 -- see septel.) The one African country on which the two sides differed was Cote d'Ivoire, with Qadhafi moving closer to the President Gbagbo, as the latter's relations with Paris progressively soured.

¶7. (C) On Middle East issues, Thoizy and Testot confirmed that both Shalgam and Qadhafi criticized U.S.-French policy on Lebanon, which they described as unfairly targeting Syria. Thoizy reported that a cousin of Qadhafi had completed a

"secret mission" to Damascus just before the Douste-Blazy visit, and offered harsh criticism of France for taking an even tougher line on Syria than the U.S.

¶18. (C) Testot added that Qadhafi asked Douste-Blazy for an update on recent French suburban unrest, which had prompted the Libyan leader to call President Chirac last November to offer assistance. Testot quipped that Qadhafi saw the Islamist menace everywhere, and was ready to help out even where such threats did not exist.

¶19. (C) Testot concluded discussion by describing the haphazard nature of the Qadhafi meeting itself, which was up in the air until it took place at the end of the day. Douste-Blazy had expected to meet with Qadhafi earlier in the day and was taken to an empty room where the French delegation waited for a half hour, before being led across the building to a ballroom where the Libyan leader was holding forth on a stage, before a lively crowd which responded boisterously, not necessarily in agreement, to his diatribe. Qadhafi abruptly departed the stage, with Douste-Blazy's delegation still present and relatively ignored, only to be replaced by another official who continued the speech. Testot described the scene as a bizarre example of "Libyan democracy in action."

¶10. (C) Comment: France is taking a more active and constructive role on the imprisoned medics issue, which represents a worthy topic for expanded cooperation with the USG. Both Testot and Thoizy stressed the GoF desire to coordinate more closely with the U.S. on the issue, and emphasized GoF support for launching the International Benghazi Families Support Fund (reftel), which the GoF hopes can help pay for treatment of children in France. Action request for Washington: Please provide guidance we can share with the GoF on U.S. efforts to help facilitate the release of the imprisoned medics. End action request.

¶11. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.

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Stapleton